

Down but Not Out

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Articles & Testimony

Al Qaeda in Iraq may be down, but it is not out. Last month, jihadists likely linked to the group posing as Iraqi Army soldiers executed 13 members of a U.S.-allied Sunni tribe near Abu Ghraib. In August and October, al Qaeda suicide bombers targeted government buildings in Baghdad, killing hundreds in the deadliest attacks against the Iraqi government since the U.S. invasion. With Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki basing much of his campaign for the January elections on his government's promise to provide security, further al Qaeda attacks could act as a spoiler, in addition to posing a significant challenge to Iraq's long-term security.

Although al Qaeda in Iraq has experienced significant setbacks since the 2007 U.S. surge, the group has never fully disappeared. Its influence in Iraq waned due to the July 2006 death of its charismatic leader, Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and because its extreme disregard for civilian life has alienated large segments of the Iraqi population. To adapt to these setbacks, the group has undergone a major organizational and ideological transformation over the last two years.

Since Zarqawi's death, al Qaeda's composition, formerly dominated by foreign jihadists, started to "Iraqify" through the recruitment of local fighters. This shift was born greatly out of necessity: Al Qaeda's force was dramatically diminished by the arrests or deaths of many foreign combatants or their relocation to new jihadi battlefields, particularly in the Maghreb and Afghanistan. Al Qaeda's leadership also recognized that it must provide a greater role for Iraqis to ensure its long-term survival: Zarqawi himself called for Iraqis to take more prominent positions within the organization.

This process of "Iraqification" was further corroborated by al Qaeda's proclamation of an "Islamic State of Iraq" in October 2006 and by jihadists' increasing focus on attacking Iraqi institutions. Police and security forces, Iraqi military personnel, federal ministries, and officials are today depicted in al Qaeda propaganda as the new "apostate occupiers" of Iraq, the "sacred land of the caliphate." This rhetoric retains potential appeal among disenfranchised Iraqi Sunnis, who are still not reconciled to the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government.

The June withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraqi cities has also provided al Qaeda with new opportunities to carry out high-profile attacks. Several communiqués released in the aftermath of al Qaeda's August attacks and endorsed by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq, described the U.S. withdrawal as the acknowledgment of the American Army's "bitter defeat" and ridiculed Maliki's government for failing to maintain security in urban centers.

Other factors account for al Qaeda's resilience. The fragile economic situation weakens Iraq's security capabilities, threatening to reverse gains in stability. Official Iraqi reports show how dramatic budget cuts have negatively affected security. This year, the government budget was reduced from \$79 billion to \$59 billion due to falling oil prices. The security sector has been particularly affected, with a freeze on new hires of police and security officers. This situation is worsened by widespread corruption and bribery, which not only plague Iraq's institutions but imperil the overall process of reconstruction.

The pervasive infiltration of Iraqi police and security forces by radical groups is particularly worrisome. A recent Interior Ministry report highlights how the bribing of Iraqi checkpoint officers and prison guards creates space for jihadists to carry out attacks. In August alone, \$10,000 in bribes was paid to various accomplices to assist al Qaeda suicide bombers in passing through security checkpoints. Official Iraqi sources indicate as well that many dangerous Islamists detained in prisons have been released through bribes, a fact that may also be responsible for the recent resurgence of armed jihad.

As reported by Salahaddin provincial officials in September, 16 al Qaeda-affiliated inmates managed to slip out of a prison facility in Tikrit with the help of their guards. Al Qaeda also benefits from corrupt members within the Iraqi judiciary who issue illegal release warrants, falsify the identity of radical inmates, or simply expunge their criminal records. Bribery has become so common that the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council ordered an investigation and made a formal request for international assistance in June.

Iraqi Interior Ministry representatives estimate that up to 50 percent of the prisoners released are likely to rejoin the insurgency. Such inappropriate detainee releases are partially the result of shortcomings in the Iraqi amnesty law adopted in 2008. The amnesty law was originally intended to draw alienated Sunni Arabs back into the political process and entice former insurgents to renounce violence. However, negligence in the application of the law, difficulty in differentiating radical detainees from more moderate prisoners, and the judiciary's lack of resources to monitor former prisoners have allowed many jihadists to be pardoned and freed. These factors will continue to contribute to a resurgence of violence as Iraq and the United States empty their prisons in the framework of the U.S.-Iraq Security

Agreement: This year alone, the United States has released 5,300 more detainees.

Maintaining networks of foreign fighters is not as important to al Qaeda in Iraq as it used to be, and a minimal number of local fighters is amply sufficient to conduct attacks and further disrupt Iraq's fragile stability.

Yet al Qaeda's vulnerabilities also mean that now is not the time for fatalism. Al Qaeda's tactics have alienated the local population, and its transnational, pan-Islamic ambition is inconsistent with most Iraqis' desire for national reconciliation. However, keeping Al Qaeda's ideology on the margins of Iraqi political life also requires legitimate and accountable Iraqi authorities fulfilling their functions, delivering effective public services, and implementing critically needed economic reforms. The credibility of the upcoming election process, along with the consolidation of security, will go a long way toward bringing an end to al Qaeda's ability to spoil the gains achieved so far, and finally discrediting the organization within Iraq.

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